Pursuits of Reason
Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell

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RELIGION AND THE DISTORTIONS OF HUMAN REASON:
ON KANT'S RELIGION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF REASON ALONE

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Over a half-dozen years ago, trying to find a way through the extraordinary difficulties of Kant's Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, I was stopped by the following passage from Stanley Cavell's The Claim of Reason:

If we think of Faust as being granted the wish to escape the human condition of knowing, I mean the condition of human knowing, then the clearest theoretical portrait of him is given by the Critique of Pure Reason, in its description of those who think to escape the necessity of reason's critique of reason and who, for example, are shown to live upside down, on their heads as it were, making the world of their experience "empirically ideal and transcendentally real." And perhaps more direct descriptions of him are to be found in Kant's Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. Here, as is typical of Kant's procedures, he goes beyond an expected Enlightenment battle that takes up the cause of reason against irrationality on the most famous field of the irrational. The collection of sections called General Observations, one of which concludes each of the four parts of Kant's volume on religion, together constitute what I think amounts to a general theory of irrationality, a systematic account of what turn out, on this theory, to be a whole class of phenomena, each of them involving a particular distortion of human reason. Kant calls the four members of this class fanaticism, superstition, delusion, and sorcery. Not the least of the illuminations of his theory is its implied proposal that, as one may frame it, the cure for Faustianism and for skepticism are the same.¹

As with so much of Cavell's writing, I felt as if he had found the words to describe what I had not yet been able fully to articulate. So with these words as guide, and remembering the feeling of discovery prompted by them, I offer this essay to Stanley Cavell on his sixtieth birthday. And I offer it not only in celebration, but also as an example of how one might let oneself be taught by his thought.

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As human beings we express our nature by posing questions. According to Kant, the three fundamental questions natural to human interest are: What can I know?, What ought I to do? and What may I hope?—the questions of science, ethics, and religion.² Taken together these questions may be said to implicate a fourth: What is man?, a question Kant adds to his initial trio in his lectures on logic. The third question, the question of hope, of religion, is as permanent and persistent as it is unstable. Its insistence is one with the fact that as finite creatures we cannot but hope. For an infinite being there is no space between its desires and their realization, and so no room, conceptually, for hope. But we must say, "where there's life there's hope," and perhaps add, if we inhabit the universe of Beckett, "and that's the problem."³ The instability of this question is due to its inability to discover how to place itself with respect to its two companion questions; its relation to these neighboring queries has proven to be inherently unstable.

A significant part of this entire problem revolves around the adjacent issue of the relationship between religion and reason, both theoretical and practical. To
begin to imagine how far this issue of the role of reason will take us, I need do no more than start by juxtaposing a contention of Luther’s with one of Kant’s. First, Luther:

For if his [God’s] righteousness were such that it could be judged to be righteous by human standards, it would clearly not be divine and would in no way differ from human righteousness. But since he is the one true God, and is wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that his righteousness also should be incomprehensible, as Paul also says where he exclaims: “O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!” [Rom. 11:33]. But they would not be incomprehensible if we were able in every instance to grasp how they are righteous.

And now Kant:

Even the Holy One of the gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before we can recognize him to be such. He also says of himself: “Why callest thou me (whom thou seest) good? There is none good (the archetype of the good) but one, that is, God (whom thou seest not).” But where do we get the concept of God as the highest good? Solely from the Idea of moral perfection, which reason traces a priori and conjoins inseparably with the concept of a free will.

Nothing could be starker than the conflict announced in these quotations. Luther requires a divergence between the standards of divine and human righteousness, and this divergence is grounded on the inaccessibility of God to human reason and the independence of Scripture from human reason. Kant demands an a priori standard of moral perfection that applies to God and to us, and is the basis for our judgment that God is good. And, of course, this standard is to be found in pure practical reason.

It is especially interesting to trace out the contrasting ways in which Kant and Luther put Scripture to use, a topic to which I shall return more than once. But here one can say that Luther has no argument or foundation for his insistence on the split between human and divine righteousness other than Scripture itself. It is the quotation from Romans that provides the basis for his conclusion that God’s judgments are incomprehensible. Throughout his works, we find Luther employing a typical pattern of establishing his conclusions, a pattern exemplified in On the Bondage of the Will, where he first produces a quotation from Scripture, then announces its plain meaning, and finally exclaims against Erasmus that whatever human reason requires, Scripture tells us clearly what is the case. And for Luther, in matters theological, when Scripture tells us what is the case, it just is the case, reason come what may. Kant, though, is adamantly unwilling to permit Scripture any substantive conclusions independent of reason. He will employ practical reason as the norm to which interpretations of Scripture must conform. This demand is given content by the a priori status of reason which, in the moral realm, is no less authoritative for the human than for the divine being. The Scriptural quotation that only God is the archetype of the good serves merely to introduce Kant’s claim that this Idea must have its source in that of moral perfection, an Idea that itself has its origin in pure practical reason. For Kant, Luther’s position must look like nothing less than fanaticism.
The first section of Part I of *On the Bondage of the Will* is entitled, "Christianity Involves Assertions; Christians Are No Skeptics," a section that may be summarized by Luther's pronouncement, "Take away assertions and you take away Christianity." And "of those things that have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings," Luther possesses not just knowledge but absolute certainty. If theoretical reason, as interpreted by the Enlightenment, results in the demolition of religion, Scriptural certainty builds it on a plateau no less secure than the Word of God. In both cases theological questions are taken to have definitive answers, answers that can be avoided only by rejecting the entire enterprise of reason (science) or Scripture. As Kant well knew, the perspective of the theoretical reason of science can tell us nothing about God's actions or judgments, their being beyond the bounds of possible experience, so that from within this perspective, if one were to view it as exclusive and all-encompassing, it would be concluded that theology ought to be committed "to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." And from within the perspective of Luther's Scripture, we can be certain of all we need to know about God's nature, judgments, and actions, since this knowledge is given to us by God Himself, and by taking this perspective, viewing it as authoritative, it should be concluded that human reason must be humbled, perhaps even committed to the flames, where it will surely end up if it does not let go of its sophistical presumptions. Kant was no less aware of the force and consequences of this conclusion. In the hands of Kant, these two positions, based as they are on some form of knowledge, whether it be knowledge derived from the facts of nature or from a realm beyond nature, are, despite their apparent distance, actually made for each other. The one absolutely fails to give us knowledge of God's actions, while the other offers us absolute success in knowing God. In practice, though, they are more or less mirror images of one another, counterparts, even if incongruous ones. Whether based on Scriptural authority or scientific certainty, whether proffering us failure or success, Kant argues that to base religion on any form of knowledge is to lead oneself into a fanaticism of human reason, and so a fanaticism of human life.

Kant believed that the traditional relation between morality and religion must be inverted, with the result that religion should be grounded on morality, and this belief and its consequences form the core of his view of the religious life. Not only did he argue, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for the claim, always associated with his name, that we cannot have theoretical knowledge of religious matters, but he thought that, even if we could have it, such knowledge would undermine morality by forcing us into forms of irrational religiosity. This latter argument is scattered throughout his writings but is contained in its most thorough and developed form in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, especially in the "General Observations" that conclude each of its four books. The phenomena described in these General Observations, fanaticism, superstition, illumination, and thaumaturgy, are all instances of the disfigurement of reason, the result of its being cast into disharmony with itself. Kant's claims about what happens when religion does not find its basis in practical reason may be taken to outline a
general theory of the distortions of reason, a theory of irrationality that describes the fate of reason when it transgresses its lawful limits or tries to expand its legitimate boundaries, usurping territory that can only do it harm.

It is perhaps the first impulse of the inquiring human mind to wish for, to strive after, knowledge of everything it raises questions about. Answers are conceived of in terms of claims to know, anything less than such a claim being less than a complete or satisfying answer. Human knowledge is thought of as a gradually increasing line of progress with no natural limitation or termination, whose extent is enlarged by an enlargement of our human experience. Picturing knowledge as this line of unlimited progress leads inevitably to our desire to extend it upwards, towards God and the other objects of religion. But the Critique of Pure Reason took it upon itself to show the distortions of this picture of human knowledge. For Kant's aim was to demonstrate not that "we are limited in the extent of our experience" but rather that "we are limited to experience." This limitation to experience, an epistemological expression of the limits of finitude, was to foreclose our knowledge of the entire supersensible realm, the realm of God, freedom, and immortality. Or perhaps Kant's endeavor was not merely to foreclose this knowledge, as if that weren't endeavor enough, but to make our wish for it appear incoherent to us, a temptation for the unattainable, and to subject this wish or fantasy of reason to a critique of reason, to confront reason with its image of itself. Such a confrontation was likely to alter radically our conception of ourselves, our conception of our basis in the world as a whole.

Yet it would be destructively misleading to view this foreclosure simply as denial. Seeing it in that way would be to take the faculty of human reason as having but one application, namely an application to what we can know. But human reason also tells us what we ought to do, and this prescription of duty is as significant to the function of reason as its task of knowledge. Indeed, if the Kantian foreclosure of knowledge were to be undone, we would no longer be the kind of creatures that we are, for we would no longer have the faculty of reason characteristic of us as human beings. The fact that practical reason stands side by side with theoretical reason is not one fact among others, but is constitutive of our human rational nature. To imagine a being who gives no role to practical reason, or who allows no unity to the two forms, practical and theoretical, of reason, is to imagine a being different from, other than, ourselves. It is some such fantasy of being other than it is, the fantasy reason can have of itself, that is to be placed under the critical enterprise. The fate of theoretical reason is to attempt to transcend, and so transgress, its boundaries. The critique of pure reason finds this attempt fruitless and self-destructive; the introduction of practical reason finds this attempt needless. What Kant takes from one (form of) reason he gives, in a different way, to another (form of) reason. The realm of the supersensible, the realm of religion, begins as an extension, a kind of outgrowth, of practical reason. Theological concepts such as grace, atonement, prayer, and mysteries must have a practical foundation, if reason is not to cripple itself. Only by basing
these concepts, as well as our religious experience, on practical reason can religion be *humanly* satisfying.

It is in this light that we should interpret Kant’s all too famous remark, “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.” The appropriate paraphrase of this remark is that Kant found it necessary to deny theoretical reason, in order to make room for practical reason. The faith that finds room here is not a mere faith, a faith anchored on nothing but its own desire to believe, but rather a faith that springs from reason—a reasonable faith, *Vernunftglaube*. So this feideistic sounding statement is, in fact, an attack on feidism, an attack which insists that faith and reason are not enemies but necessary partners in the sphere of the supersensible. Clearly enough, knowledge not only leaves no room for faith, it leaves no room for hope either. If we know that something is or is not the case, then it makes no sense, conceptually, for us to hope that it is so; we just know that it is or isn’t, and the matter ends there. The relation between the concepts and psychology of knowledge and hope is such that I can only hope for those things about which I do not know; if I have the latter, the former is empty. But about things that ought to be the case, hope is available. For, alas, what is the case does not always accord with what ought to be the case. And this gap between ought and is, between freedom and nature, allows me to hope that what ought to be will be. So there is conceptual room for hope to follow morality, unlike the obliteration of hope by knowledge. Hope and faith can bear an intimate relation to practical reason that theoretical reason is incapable of supporting. And for Kant, without practical reason, faith and hope will either die out or become fanatical, a fate perhaps not worse than, but the equal of, death.

The requirements that Kant imposes upon religious faith force him to maintain a precarious balance. On the one hand, theoretical reason of any form cannot serve as the authentic basis of religion. On the other hand, the hope of faith cannot operate freely of itself, without any basis in reason, for then it will become wild, soaring out of control, making pronouncements which deform the reasonable life. So Kant both wants a real faith and a reasonable one, a conjunction that we today often find incomprehensible. What allows Kant to maintain his balance is his conception of the practical, a distinctive interpretation of morality and practical reason. To show how this conception of morality structures his view of religion is one aim of this paper.

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As early as 1775, in two letters to J. C. Lavater, Kant outlines the central tenets of his view of religion. He distinguishes, first, between the teachings of Christ and the reports we have of these teachings, and then, with regard to these teachings, between the moral teachings of the New Testament and its dogmas. Dogmas concern only what God does, whereas the moral teachings of the Gospel “tell us what we must do to make ourselves *worthy* of justification.” We have no need, that is,
no moral need, to inquire into the way in which God will achieve His purposes, since "all the guidance we need"\(^{15}\) is given by practical reason, by the moral law, which tells us what is within our power. We can do what we ought to do, and as for the rest we should leave that to God, instead of presumptuously pronouncing on His powers and actions. Our pronouncements about the Divine are presumptuous both because He is inaccessible to our theoretical reason, and because these pronouncements fulfill no moral interest; they are indicative of a curiosity that demonstrates nothing more than our arrogance.\(^{14}\) Insight into God's means will not make anyone a better person, and it is that which it is our duty to become.

It should be said at the outset, though, that Kant does not deny that God plays some role in relation to our justification. Indeed, he says that we can "humbly rely on," have "unconditional trust" in, the help of God, but only if "we do as much good as is in our power."\(^{15}\) We may partake of the divine supplement to our deficiencies, no matter how it may come about, so long as we are not "unworthy" or "unfit" for it.\(^{16}\) But this unknown and mysterious supplement is something outside of the human domain, something to be legitimately surrendered by reason to God. Speculation about the mechanism of its operation is idle and morally worthless. So although Kant does not efface God's grace, he sets up, so to speak, a division of labor between this grace and practical reason. To step over this divide, to attempt to labor on God's grace rather than on what reason prescribes to us as duty, is to overstep our humanity, which, of course, only a human being can do, and which leads to those distortions to be analyzed in Kant's book on religion.

In accord with this division of labor, which apportions to us action from duty, Kant insists that "so-called worship" such as "confession of faith," "appeal to holy names," and "observance of religious ceremonies" can be of no help.\(^{17}\) For in themselves these devices of religion cannot make us better people, and so they can play no direct moral role in our lives.\(^{18}\) We tend to substitute these rituals and wishes for the performance of our duty, and thus to sidestep the prescriptions of reason. We attempt to woo God's favor without being worthy of it, cramming our souls with devotional testimonies, wishing God to do everything for us, to make us better people, as if by magically uttering some formula of confession I make myself pleasing to God.\(^{19}\) But I must make myself worthy of this pleasure, and it is only by acting from the law of freedom, the moral law, that I can accrue this worth. Only such action will help me to defeat "that endless religious madness to which people in all ages are inclined."\(^{20}\)

This endless religious madness is a result of that fanatical distortion of human reason which I have claimed it is the purpose of the General Observations to describe. One way to lay the groundwork for my discussion of these Observations is to examine Kant's attitude towards Scripture, his motives for subordinating ecclesiastical faith to pure religious faith. Here again Luther provides a worthwhile contrast. In his appeal to the ruling class, Luther goes on the attack, as he so often did, against the "Romanists" who claim to be the only true interpreters of
Scripture, usurping authority for themselves alone, and insisting that the pope cannot err in matters of faith. Luther mounts his attack on the words of Scripture itself, citing and interpreting various passages in an attempt to show that the Romanists "cannot quote a single letter of Scripture to support their claim." When they say that St. Peter was given the keys and so received authority, it is just false; for the keys were given to the "whole Christian community" and Christ prayed for "all apostles and Christians." Why should we reject the judgments and opinions of good Christians, who have the true faith, spirit, and understanding, in favor of the judgments of the pope, merely because of his office and title? Unless truly of the faith and spirit the pope's judgments can count for nothing. And no criterion of authority can be founded simply on the position one holds within the Church. In Luther's eyes, to so attempt to base religious authority would be to undermine the real authority of Scripture, and even that of the Holy Spirit itself. Attempting to erect a new criterion of religious knowledge, Luther enters his plea for the democratization of authority:

... each and all of us are priests because we all have the one faith, the one gospel, one and the same sacrament; why then should we not be entitled to taste or test, and to judge what is right or wrong in the faith.

Alluding to the example of Balaam's ass, who was visited by the angel of God (Numbers 22:22-35), Luther concludes, "Since God once spoke through an ass, why should He not come in our day and speak through a man of faith and even contradict the pope?" No criterion other than Spirit or faith is a relevant basis for the authority of Scriptural and other religious pronouncements. Elsewhere, Luther distinguishes between the external and internal clarity of Scripture. Internal clarity, that clarity on whose clearness our salvation may depend, is located in "the understanding of the heart." Although someone may quote and recite everything to be found in Scripture, if they do not have the "Spirit of God," they will understand none of it, and will still bear a darkened heart. "For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it."

Luther's attempt to subvert papal authority by introducing a new criterion of religious knowledge, his claim that everyone informed by Spirit may be a true interpreter of Scripture, was met with immediate opposition, not solely on ecclesiastical grounds but on philosophical grounds as well. His opponents in the Catholic counter-reformation quickly seized upon what they took to be the central problem with his overthrow of traditional authority—how could one know if one was really informed by Spirit or faith; how could one distinguish true illumination from deception or presumption? If the arbiter of Scriptural interpretation was each individual's own conscience or faith, if the criterion of knowledge was thus wholly subjective, how could one prevent religious anarchy from being loosed upon the Church? His Catholic opposition saw him as providing not a passage to the community of Christian believers, but a quick and narrow path to the anarchism of subjectivity. If Luther "promoted the individual human voice in the religious life," how was one to stop this promotion from slipping into
the abyss, from placing upon each individual, alone, the infinite burden of understanding God's Word. It was no wonder that many thought that under this burden finitude would be crushed, and become indistinguishable from fanaticism.

We can see Kant as attempting to steer a middle path between the authoritarianism of papal authority and the anarchism of unprincipled individuality. Kant was no more sympathetic than Luther to the brute acceptance of Church degrees, simply because they were Church degrees, on matters of faith and morals. No one person, because of his genealogical descent, could be in a position to make binding pronouncements on moral questions. And Kant thought of clericalism as dominated by "fetish-worship" that resulted in a pseudo-service "subversive to all endeavors toward true religion." Yet he was just as concerned with the prospect that religion might be undermined by the other horn of the dilemma, that each person could come to be, with no standard or norm governing their deliberations, his or her own interpreter of morals and Scripture. To claim that one needs "merely an inner feeling to recognize the true meaning of Scripture as well as its divine origin" is to allow every kind of arbitrariness, of mere wish, of fantasy, into the domain of religion. If religion becomes the province of solitary communion with God and His Word, then it will cease to be linked in the appropriate way with the moral life. For this life is the life of community, a life held in common, and without morality as its foundation religion will amount to nothing but the projection of each person's idiosyncracies. That is, for Kant, an assured road to madness.

It was central to Kant's division of the psychic economy that "feeling is private to every individual and cannot be demanded of others," whereas reason is public and universal, given in equal measure to all. Moreover, feeling "teaches absolutely nothing," but tells us only how a person is affected as regards pleasure and displeasure. Pleasure is governed by empirical regularities that can vary between persons and even over the course of a single person's life. To make feeling the touchstone of religious authority is to elevate the maxim "à chacun son goût" to the status of law—and that law would breed immediate lawlessness. Kant does want the moral community to be governed by laws of freedom, but he insists that this freedom, the freedom of the members of a kingdom of ends, is not to be confused with lawlessness. His official definition of the kingdom of ends comes towards the end of the second chapter of the *Groundwork*:

I understand by a "kingdom" a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws. Now since laws determine ends as regards their universal validity, we shall be able—if we abstract from the personal differences between rational beings, and also from the content of their private ends—to conceive a whole of all ends in systematic conjunction...

A kingdom of ends is a "systematic union of rational beings under common objective laws," and is "in no way based on feelings, impulses, and inclinations." And when Kant proceeds to religion and the founding of a kingdom of God on earth, he tells us, even in the section headings of his book, that "the concept of an ethical commonwealth is the concept of a PEOPLE OF GOD under ethical laws." Here again he insists on the publicness of the laws that govern this com-
monwealth. So however else we may interpret the kingdom of ends and its theological analogue, it sets up an objective, public, and universal standard as the charter by reference to which it is governed. This pure practical charter provides the common framework of endeavor for all reasonable and rational beings, and so provides the standpoint for a harmonious moral life without unresolvable conflicts of authority. Each person makes law for him or herself, as Kant insists, but since the content of pure practical reason is the same for all, each person at the same time makes law for everyone else.

Kant’s steering of a middle path, between authority vested in one person because of his official position within the Church and authority held by all who experience an upsurge of divine illumination, has consequences that match those left by the introduction of his concept of autonomy. As needs little discussion, autonomy undercuts the possibility of any one person, or group of persons, claiming rightful authority in matters of morality, as if some individual could have special powers that fit him to be the moral head of a kingdom of ends. Such claims would, in effect, demonstrate that this so-called moral head did not understand what it meant to act from the moral law, for, as regards moral legislation, practical reason makes no hierarchical distinctions between leader and led. Practical reason operates in such a way that its content and function are identical for each of us. But Kant’s notion of autonomy has often been interpreted to mean mere choice, where this choice is just a structureless decision to follow consistently any set of principles. It is as if being a law unto oneself meant that, like the despot of a south seas island, I can enact any legislation I wish, constrained by nothing but the fact that I must choose. But such a choice without structure is no more Kantian autonomy than the categorical imperative is a formal principle without content. To act autonomously is to act from pure practical reason, to take pure practical reason as regulative for your deliberations, and pure practical reason has a determinate, if complex, structure. Although we are transcendentally free to act from or contrary to the moral law, we act autonomously only when we elect our moral personality as governor of our practical deliberations. Since the structure of moral personality is the same for all rational human beings, each and every individual can perform this election for himself with the result nevertheless being one of unanimity. So Kant makes room for the democratization of authority while showing that democracy and anarchy are distinct, that they are governed by different principles, or rather that one is governed by principle and the other by whim or feeling or, if you like, illumination. This democracy is one in which each person is sovereign, and yet where no one’s sovereignty poses a threat to anyone else. This particular mixture of equality and authority is the only democracy of reason that Kant thinks we should be party to.

This same democratization of authority, based on the same arguments, is also applied by Kant to the interpretation of Scripture. Here too Kant’s goal is a community of believers, human beings who can hold religious beliefs in common, and whose beliefs are rooted not in visitation by spiritual insight, but in reasonable ground. Historical sectarianism, the schisms of cults, of partial communities, is
combatted by the one universal church of pure religious faith. Historical or empirical or revealed faith, taken as the basis of religion, loses "the most important mark of truth, namely a rightful claim to universality." Historical or revealed faith cannot produce universal conviction, since it is based on the occurrence of an event, usually long ago, that by itself is incapable of compelling any moral belief. Any such event stands in need of interpretation, and if we are to give it an interpretation produced by theoretical reason then we cannot view it as supernatural; the supernatural and theoretical reason never cross paths, since theory is chained to experience and experience to the world of nature. And if we do not give the event a moral interpretation, if we do not take the norm of pure practical reason as giving us the meaning of the event, then the possibility of fitting it into a universal system of human endeavor is lost. Theoretical and practical reason provide the only universal principles that frame the living of our human lives. Belief in the religious significance of an historical event that is outside this system of reason may reveal something about me, about my pathology, but it cannot be communicated so as to produce conviction in others. Or, rather, if conviction is produced, it will be an accident, not demonstrated by a principle of reason that, as human beings, we share, but resulting from the coincidence of our pathos, whose mark is its fortuitousness. And if I further take the suprareasonable significance of this religious event as the governing principle of my life, I will start to believe that I alone, and those who may come to believe as I do, can interpret the holy faith and its requirements. The result of this "illumination" will be the displacement of demonstration by presumption; saying what is so and its being so will start to merge, since no necessarily shared principles will constrain the illuminati's pronouncements. The reverse side of this presumption will be those doubts and controversies that must arise when an event is placed outside the system of reason. This is not to say that doubts and controversies cannot arise within the system of reason, but only that when they arise outside this system, there are no rules or standards for their resolution; rhetoric not argument, accident not necessity, luck not reason, will be the basis for deciding controversies. And one woman's successful resolution will cause another man's doubts. Empirical faith and the anarchism of subjectivity join hands in the destruction of moral community.

Moreover, the need for a belief in supernatural events may be a sign of our moral unbelief, of our lack of faith in the practical validity of the moral law. For the Idea of a person morally well-pleasing to God is found in our reason; and if in order to take someone as an example conforming to this Idea, an example worthy of imitation, we require of him not just a morally perfect life but that he "should have performed miracles or had them performed for him," we confess our own moral unbelief, the wavering, or even absence, of our faith in the purity of morality. Speaking morally, what can the supposed performance of a miracle add to what we take to be a morally perfect life? It is as if we force ourselves to think that religious belief must be placed in something beyond the powers of our own reason; as if anything already present in our practical reason cannot be worthy of
the sublimity of religious faith. And that suggests that our moral psychology is subject to instability, an instability that stands in constant need of repair, but of repair from within, since the real stability of our moral belief springs from morality alone. Indeed, not only can morality not derive its validity from miracles, but miracles, even as regards their possibility, must be judged by what Kant calls the negative criterion of reason:

\[ \ldots \text{namely, that even though something is represented as commanded by God, through a direct manifestation of Him, yet, if it flatly contradicts morality, it cannot, despite all appearances, be of God (for example, were a father ordered to kill his son who is, so far as he knows, perfectly innocent).}^48\]

Of what use can miracles be to us? If we count on them to fortify our belief, then this shows our unbelief. And they can do absolutely nothing for us; their occurrence does not make me a better person; it does not even contribute to the betterment of my moral disposition, for the witnessing of a miracle may inspire fear or awe, but the required moral emotion is respect, and that respect is to be found nowhere but in the moral law itself.\(^49\)

In a footnote in the third book of Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone Kant explicitly raises the question that shadows his discussion of morality and Scripture. Reacting to Michaelis's interpretation of Psalm LIX, 11-16, where, approving a prayer for revenge, Michaelis claims that the Psalms are inspired and that "we must have no morality holier than the Bible,"\(^50\) Kant asks,

\[ \ldots \text{I raise the question whether morality should be expounded according to the Bible or whether the Bible should not rather be expounded according to morality.}^51\]

His answer, expected by now, is,

\[ \ldots \text{I should try, as a first alternative, to bring the New Testament passage into conformity with my own self-subsistent moral principles} \ldots \text{Or, if this cannot be managed, I shall rather have it that this passage is not to be understood in a moral sense at all.}^52\]

Of course "my own self-subsistent moral principles" are reason's principles; they are mine as the incarnation of a being of reason.

I have already tried to explain some of the motivation that underpins Kant's demand for the priority of morality to the Bible. In the religion of pure reason the Bible can play an illustrative role, the role of a narrative that illustrates the principles and Ideas of pure practical reason. And because human beings have a "natural need and desire \ldots for something sensibly tenable," some historical faith based on a sacred book is "usually to be found at hand."\(^53\) But any sacred book must be united with morality in the appropriate way so that morality serves as our guide for its understanding and interpretation. Then the sacred book can serve as a depiction, a vivid representation to our imagination, of the purely moral relation. Many different, and even divergent, narratives can illustrate the same moral Idea, and insofar as they are taken to illustrate such an Idea, their divergence in details will not lead to controversies and quarrels. It will not be necessary to ask which of many seemingly mutually exclusive representations is true, since the function of these representations is to make sensible what is ultimately intel-
ligible, to make comprehensible to us what is independently given us by our one, universal reason. Thus Kant can show that the "universal true religious belief" in God as holy Legislator, benevolent Ruler, and righteous Judge is shared by the religion of Zoroaster, the Hindus, the religion of Egypt, the Goths, the Jews, and, of course, Christians. Moreover, the similarity in representations among these various religions is only explicable if they represent an Idea that is "present universally in human reason." Dissension among historical faiths will arise only if the sacred books of these faiths are detached from their practical function and taken to represent in themselves what must be believed. Kant describes his aim as that of showing "how an historical account is to be put to moral use;" the moral meaning of an historical account is "the only one whereby we can derive something conducive to out betterment from a passage which otherwise would be only an unfruitful addition to our historical knowledge." We need not ask about the intention of the author of a sacred book, since this intention by itself serves no practical interest of ours; the moral interest of an historical narrative, discoverable by practical reason alone, is all that is relevant in helping us to become better people; and that, for Kant, must be the underlying aim of all true religion.

Kant's conception of Scripture is an instance of what he calls, in a footnote to Book Two of Religion, the "schematism of analogy." Alluding to the schematism chapter in the first Critique and the section on the typic in the second Critique, Kant says that to schematize is to "render a concept intelligible by the help of an analogy to something sensible." Such a schematism is a means of understanding with which we cannot dispense, a "limitation of human reason" inseparable from it, so that "we must always resort to some analogy to natural existences to render supersensible qualities intelligible to us." Scripture can remain within the bounds of reason if we understand it as schematizing intelligible moral Ideas. Thus it represents the Idea of moral perfection in human guise, and represents the conflict between the intelligible principles of good and evil as a battle between two persons outside of us, Christ and Satan. Yet when this vivid and popular mode of representation is "divested of its mystical veil, it is easy to see that, for practical purposes, its spirit and rational meaning have been valid and binding for the whole world and for all time." The danger inherent in this inevitable need for a schematism is that we may come to believe that it can extend our knowledge, and so we may transform this schematism of analogy into a "schematism of objective determination." That is, because a schema renders a supersensible concept intelligible to us, because it provides an example of such a concept, we are tempted to infer that the supersensible object itself takes the schema as a predicate. But the schema conditions only my understanding of the concept, not its objective possibility as well. When we do yield to the temptation to infer from the "schema of a concept to the objective fact itself," we become entangled in an anthropomorphism which has "most injurious consequences" for moral religion. This anthropomorphism, this travelling from our sensible representation of supersensible objects to these objects themselves, is, as it were, an inversion of the structure of our moral nature. For the intelligible world contains
the ground of the sensible world,\textsuperscript{66} so that we must not take these sensible depictions as ends-in-themselves, but must trace them back to the intelligible principles they illustrate. We take a limitation of our nature, the fact that we are sensuous, or sensible, beings in time as our essence; of course from some perspectives this limitation is of the essence, and part of the problem is that we do not know whether, in general, to take limitations as being essential, or as being defects or deficiencies of the essential. And from one unambiguous perspective, the perspective of theoretical knowledge, our sensibility does characterize us essentially, for its critical presence keeps us from falling into illusions, from tying reason in knots; sensibility here does not really defeat knowledge so much as define it.\textsuperscript{67} But with respect to religion, as Kant conceives it morally, we are faced with a different situation; it is very difficult to find a perspective here from which sensibility is defining, for it is rather the noumenal self, the will, that characterizes us essentially in this realm. And if we yield to sensibility, we are led to illusion, say, the illusion of anthropomorphism, where we substitute a Scriptural depiction for the intelligible principles it depicts; sensibility here can seem to defeat us. In the theoretical sphere the denial of sensibility defeats us, whereas in the practical sphere, under conditions we are all too tempted, too human, to yield to, sensibility itself can defeat us. One might say that for knowledge this "limitation" appears as sensibility, something that it is sensible for us to restrict ourselves to, that keeps us within the human bounds of propriety; for morality this "limitation" appears as sensuousness, something that allures or seduces us, something whose triumph costs us dearly. Since one mode of reason's propriety is another mode's seductiveness, we can have no general theory of limitation, but must look at each instance in its own particular context.

Kant is often called, by philosophers of different persuasions and sympathies, the philosopher of human limitations. Although this title does have some justification, at least insofar as one is called upon to produce four words that describe Kant, it could also be applied without strain to Locke or Hume or Augustine, and so on. What betokens Kant's uniqueness is the elaborate pictures he gives us of what transpires when these limitations are transgressed. His sensitivity to what happens to our humanity when we overreach these limitations is matched by his insistence that this overstepping is natural to us (and in that sense inevitable), as if finitude must continually stretch itself towards infinity, even at the pain of its loss of shape. As if transgression of the human were as natural an expression, even proof, of our humanity as we have.\textsuperscript{68}

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The tensions and fears that befall our finitude in the epistemological and ethical domains are sometimes parallel, but I want to point again to some differences. In knowledge, reason naturally desires insight into things-in-themselves, yet this desire itself makes no sense, since it is constitutive for the finitude of our reason that its understanding is bound to the conditions of sensibility. In
morality, reason desires perfection, and this desire makes perfect sense, since we can choose to act so as to bring about this perfection. Our boundary here is not imposed by a constitutive fact about ourselves, but by our own will, by a "certain self-incurred perversity." The conditions of sensibility do not provoke our knowledge to shame, for there is nothing about the self that is exposed by these conditions. But the perversity we will upon ourselves provokes the greatest shame, for it exposes our choice of wickedness, it is the shame the self takes in itself when it performs an act against itself. It is the shame of evil. So if we take that beautiful expression of the limitation of theoretical reason found in the preface to the first Critique—"Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer"—we can match this beauty by a different, and not fully parallel, description for practical reason, namely, that human reason has this even more peculiar fate that in the genus of its actions it is burdened by tasks which, as prescribed by the very nature of its reason, it is able to perform, but which, although incapable of explanation, it never does perform. This is the paradox of radical evil articulated by Kant in the first book of Religion. It is the contradiction between freedom's power and freedom's performance; it is a contradiction within our will. If we attempt to explain this contradiction, we will entangle ourselves in the dialectic of theoretical reason; why we are evil is a question which we cannot ignore and which we cannot answer, except to say, of course, that we are evil because we choose it. This choice itself stands mute, even if impossible to ignore, and requires not so much an explanation as a conversion of the will, a rebirth, a rechoosing of ourselves.

These circumstances of tension undergird Kant's constant drawing of priorities throughout his moral and religious philosophy. Radical evil comes into the world because we invert the correct ordering of our incentives, because we subordinate pure practical reason to our sensuous inclinations, because we make the latter the condition of the former. The ground of this evil is not to be found in our sensuous nature itself, since that nature is simply given to us and so we are not responsible, not accountable, for it; to view our being born embodied as the cause of evil in the world is to narrow our view of ourselves to that of a merely animal being; it is to take our animality as in itself the ruler of our world. Nor can we characterize ourselves as malignant, for then opposition to the moral law would itself be set up as an incentive of the will; we would then be viewing ourselves as devilish beings, below or beneath even the animal kingdom. Rather, the three predispositions that constitute our fixed moral character—call them pure practical reason, empirical practical reason, and the natural inclinations—are all in themselves good, but since we must order them through our choices, through the exercise of our will, we ourselves can bring evil into the world, we continually court evil. And thus arises the possibility, and for Kant the universality, though not the necessity, of what he calls the "perversity of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order [of priority] among the incentives of a free will." Kant could
assent to both the example and the analysis of that former Manichee, St. August-
in: 

Suppose that two men, of precisely similar disposition in mind and body, see the beauty of the same woman’s body, and the sight stirs one of them to enjoy her unlawfully, while the other continues unmoved in his decision of chastity. What do we suppose to be the cause of an evil choice in the one and not in the other? What produced that evil will? It was not the beauty of the woman; for it did not have that effect in both of them, although both had precisely the same view of her. Was it the flesh of the beholder? Then why did it affect one and not the other? The mind: Why not the mind of both? For we assumed them to be alike in both mind and body. Are we to say that one of them was tempted by an unseen suggestion from a malignant spirit, which would imply that he did not of his own will fall in with the suggestion, or whatever sort of persuasion it was?

... Now if both experienced the same temptation, and one succumbed and consented to it, while the other remained unmoved, the only way to solve the difficulty is evidently to say that one refused and the other agreed to lose his chastity. What other reason could there be than this personal decision, given that their dispositions were precisely the same, in body and mind? Neither beauty of body, nor flesh of beholder, nor suggestions of spirits, but refusal or consent, the will, originates evil.

Augustine goes on to say:

The truth is that one should not try to find an efficient cause for a wrong choice. It is not a matter of efficiency, but of deficiency; the evil will itself is not effective, but defective. For to defect from him who is the Supreme Existence, to something of less reality, this is to begin to have an evil will. To try to discover the causes of such defection—deficient, not efficient causes—is like trying to see darkness or to hear silence. Yet we are familiar with darkness and silence, and we can only be aware of them by means of eyes and ears, but this is not by perception but by absence of perception.

Although Augustine’s statement here partakes of his neo-Platonism, the idea of defection is not wholly alien to Kant. As Augustine pronounces the evil will a defection “from him who is the Supreme Existence,” Kant takes it as a defection too, but a defection from ourselves, from the idea of our moral personality constructed by our own reason, an idea that humbles our self-conceit by checking our sensuous nature. The darkness that haunts our existence is of our own making, and the light that can dissipate this darkness is, contrary to Augustine, not external to us, but within our moral personality itself. Kant, as it were, makes this metaphysics of defection internal to reason and so the notion of defection becomes doubly mysterious. How we defect from the Supreme Good, from the starry heavens above, is hard enough to comprehend; how we could defect from ourselves, from the moral law within, could indeed be called a darkness visible only by absence of perception. It seems to be part of the logic of the self that it is continually in danger of being lost and so must be perpetually refound, as though the self must come to want to be what it already is. By cleaving to my intelligible self, I vanquish evil. My will is my weight.

Kant’s diagnosis of radical evil, his discussion of the schematism of analogy, his role for Scripture vis-a-vis morality, his distinction between historical and pure faith, and much else in his moral religion, are his attempt to keep the interplay of
the sensible and the intelligible in its proper structure. The basic argument is repeated over and over again, and not only in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. For example, to give one more brief instance, in his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, Kant distinguishes between external and internal revelation. External revelation is further divided into two kinds, revelation through works and through words. It is this external revelation that Christianity can recognize as its own. But there is also an inward revelation that precedes and serves as a judge of external revelation; of it Kant says, “Inward divine revelation is God’s revelation to us through our own reason.” From this “inward divine revelation” comes my knowledge of moral laws and from this knowledge I am able to form a determinate concept of God as moral governor of the world. On this basis of reason’s revelation of morality, which constrains any reasonable idea of God, I have a norm in accordance with which I can judge whether it is God Himself who has appeared to me in an external revelation. So, as in the sections on revelation in *Religion*, we get a structure of priority and subordination:

Here the religion of reason always has to remain the substratum and foundation of every investigation. It is according to this religion that the value of verbal revelation must be determined. So it must precede every other revelation and serve as a yardstick.

Kant is careful not to deny that there may be a revelation beyond reason, “for reason can neither deny nor prove the possibility of such things.” But he insists that reason is all we need, and that if we adhere to the path of reason we will be worthy “of any higher insight which might be provided to supplement reason’s deficiencies.” So this possibility of a revelation above reason in no way infects the priority of reason over revelation. It is a possibility which changes neither our actions nor our motivations. We are to follow the prescriptions of reason, which are the standards any possible revelation must meet, and we can then rest secure in the belief that we have done all that is up to us to do.

Parallel types of priorities are the legacy of Kant’s religious (and moral) philosophy. Besides the overarching duality of intelligible/sensible and that of reason/revelation I have just discussed, Kant also gives us, to attempt a short catalogue, those of moral/statutory laws, rational/historical, pure religious/ecclesiastical, universally valid/contingent, a priori/a posteriori (the marks of the former being “necessity and strict universality”), and, I have wanted to add, publicity/privacy. These pairs of dualities are, obviously enough, all connected, so let me briefly try to draw them together in this way. Neither God nor beast, says Kant, we hang between. If we deny our sensible nature, we lose our limitation to the natural world; if we deny our intelligible nature, we lose our aspiration to divinity. The way to capture our humanity is to get the mixture right, and this structure is up to our will. About those who have meditated on our human sensuous nature Cavell has said:

Yet those who have had the clearest perception of human sensuous nature as a whole have not seen tragedy in it, but cautionary myth. The Buddha, Plato, St. Paul, take our sensuous imprisonment as one station on the path of existence, from which each human being is to arise.
Kant rings a novel twist on the notion of arising from our sensuous imprisonment. For he tells us that we can arise from it here and now, if only we so choose. And to arise from this imprisonment, we need not, cannot, deny our sensuous nature, but must place it in its proper role in our human life. Indeed, to place it in this role is to create the proper human life, to give appropriate structure to the link that hangs us between the animal and divine. Our choice of proper structure is our choice for humanity.

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To focus even more directly on Kant's depiction of the religious distortions of human reason, it is best to approach the General Observations that concern grace, for the moral threat of grace is described with special vividness by him. No doubt Kant's approach to the topic of grace is lined with danger. For if post-Reformation, not to mention Augustinian, Christianity has a core of distinctness, it is to be found in the dogmas surrounding grace. Luther referred to Augustine as the doctor of grace, and that was a title that he himself would have been happy to appropriate. The first and the fourth of Kant's General Observations are specifically devoted to the doctrine of grace. Works of grace, and our "imagined inward experience" of having been worked on by grace, give rise to what Kant calls fanaticism; means of grace and our attempt "to operate upon the supernatural" correspond to thaumaturgy. And one might even designate Kant's entire vision of what happens when religion is not within the limits of reason alone as that of the fanaticism of reason. For it is precisely where God's works of grace meet up with reason's morality that the battle for the life of reason is waged. Reason is here forced to either cede or stand its ground. And nothing less than the structure of our human lives, the nature of our basis in the world as a whole, hangs upon the outcome of this confrontation. But before I look at the first and fourth Observations in detail, let me draw the contours of the Kantian battle lines.

Perhaps the most famous rallying cry of Kant's moral theory is that ethics is not the study of happiness, but rather of what is required of us in order to be worthy of happiness. Before our entrance into the city of happiness, reason demands that we ask whether we merit, are worthy of, the attainment of this happiness. Happiness can satisfy the interest of reason only on the condition that we do merit it; only happiness proportionate to virtue assures the non-arbitrariness of the moral world. It is worth quoting the way in which Kant expresses this thought in Religion Within the Limits or Reason Alone, a book which, given his conception of religion, could not help but be about the central topics of morality as well:

... as beings endowed with reason and freedom, this happiness is far from being first, nor indeed is it unconditionally an object of our maxims; rather this object is worthiness to be happy, i.e. the agreement of all our maxims with the moral law. That this is objectively the condition whereby alone the wish for happiness can square with legislative reason—therein consists the whole precept of morality; and the moral cast of mind consists in the disposition to harbor no wish except on these terms.